

Truancy court is in order in Montgomery County

New program will address truant students at two county middle schools

by Jason Tomassini | Staff Writer

Montgomery County Public Schools announced Wednesday its new truancy court program, aimed at proactively addressing student absenteeism that county officials say could grow worse.

The program officially began four weeks ago at Francis Scott Key and Neelsville middle schools, in Silver Spring and Germantown respectively, and will continue next year. Funded by a federal grant, the program emulates the truancy court in Baltimore City run by the University of Baltimore School of Law.

Ten students have participated in the truancy court at Key, a school chosen because its working-class parents can't always ensure their children are attending school, said Key Principal Eric Minus. More than 14 percent of students at Key missed more than 20 days of school in 2009, the highest rate of all MCPS middle schools, according to the Maryland State Department of Education's "2009 Maryland Report Card." At Neelsville, 11.6 percent of students missed more than 20 days of school in 2009, according to the state study.

"We have a community of parents who are out working before their kids even get up in the morning," Minus said Wednesday at a news conference at Key to announce the program.

Since the program began at Key, none of the participants has missed a day of school, Minus said.

Participation in truancy court is voluntary, as is attendance from the students' parents. A volunteer judge serves as the students' case worker for 10 weekly sessions, during which they discuss any issues surrounding the student's absenteeism.

Criminal penalties cannot be imposed on truant students in Montgomery County, and police cannot detain students found out of school on a school day. Parents, however, can be charged with misdemeanor penalties if their children are chronically truant. However, the students must be under 16 years old for parents to have criminal culpability.

Last year, 984 MCPS students were classified as habitually truant for missing at least 36 days of school in a year. But in 2008, according to the state department of education,

9,800 MCPS students were absent more than 20 days, a statistic that is more representative of the truancy problem in the county, said Councilwoman Valerie Ervin.

"We believe it's a bigger problem that most people realize," said Ervin (D-Dist. 5) of Silver Spring, who commissioned the county Office of Legislative Oversight to issue a 116-page report on truancy.

Many high schools clamored for the program, Ervin said, but the University of Baltimore School of Law said approaching middle schools is a more effective way to attack truancy before it becomes chronic.

Truancy court is held in eight Baltimore schools and 55 percent of participants have reduced school absences by 75 percent, said Gloria Danziger, a senior fellow at the University of Baltimore School of Law who started the truancy court program in 2005. Of middle school students in Baltimore, 18.6 percent missed more than 20 days of school in 2009, according to the state study.

"We started out thinking parents are responsible in not making sure the kids go to school, the parents don't care, the kids are bored, they don't go to school," Danziger said in a phone interview prior to Wednesday's press conference. "What we have found is that there are really very complex problems that underline truant behavior."

For more on truancy in Montgomery County, see the March 31 issue of the Gazette.